



Six Recommended Ways for Religious and Traditional Actors to Fight Racism

On May 25th, 2020, a 46-year-old man named George Floyd died in Minnesota after police officer Derek Chauvin pinned him down with his knee on his neck during an arrest. Since then, protests have formed across the United States, with several others around the world demonstrating solidarity and demanding justice and a continued fight to end racism.

The Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers recognizes the need to address race inequality across the communities where we work. We remain committed as an organization to confront injustice, listen and learn from those on the frontlines, and to bring to light the intersections between discrimination and all forms of violence. Religious and traditional leaders have taken transformative roles in supporting peace and changing oppressive systems around the world and have been central to many anti-racist movements. When we collectively speak for love, truth and justice, we stand against systemic exclusion and oppression, allowing us to strive for a world of sustainable peace.

What is Structural and Institutional Racism?

Structural and institutional racism results in various forms of insidious violence across the world stemming from the brutal histories of slavery and colonization. Structural racism is “the normalization and legitimization of an array of dynamics – historical, cultural, institutional and interpersonal – that routinely advantage whites while producing cumulative and chronic adverse outcomes for people of color.”¹ Structural racism becomes institutional in that it results in policies, laws and systems that create disparate opportunities and outcomes for whole arrays of communities based on their skin color. Structural and institutional racism is reflected in systemic inequities across almost all societies including disproportionate incarceration, income inequality, differing health outcomes, lack of access to political power and segregated education systems among many others.

Black Lives Matter Movement

Throughout many of the protests in the United States in response to the death of George Floyd, you will see the affirmation that [Black Lives Matter](#). Black Lives Matter is an anti-racist movement that was founded in 2013 after the death of Trayvon Martin, a seventeen year old unarmed black teenager in Florida who was murdered by George Zimmerman, a white armed civilian, while walking home from a convenience store. Mr. Zimmerman was acquitted. Black Lives Matter is now a global foundation established formally in the U.S., the United Kingdom and Canada “whose mission is to eradicate white supremacy and build local power to intervene in violence inflicted on Black communities by the state and vigilantes.”

¹ Lawrence, Keith and Terry Keleher, “Chronic Disparity: Strong and Pervasive Evidence of Racial Inequalities, POVERTY OUTCOMES, Structural Racism,” [Race and Public Policy Conference](#), UC Berkeley, 2004.

Six Recommended Ways for Religious and Traditional Actors to Fight Racism

1. Listen and uplift the voices of people of color and other marginalized groups in your community

There is a long history of religious leaders leading anti-racist liberation movements such as the [Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King](#), [Mahatma Gandhi](#), [Thich Nhat Hanh](#) and [Bishop Desmond Tutu](#). Religious and traditional leaders can use scripture to teach their congregations and communities about the fight to end racism and related forms of discrimination. One of the most effective ways to fight racism is to listen to those who experience it, learn from them and amplify their voices. Religious and traditional leaders often have the platform in their communities, no matter how big or small, to uplift voices that inspire change and to inspire their communities to make the effort to listen and learn,

2. Encourage Interreligious Collaboration

Racism and injustices are embedded in our social structures at a community and national level. Interreligious collaboration and a whole-of-society approach is necessary to unite diverse communities. Therefore, religious leaders should unite with other faith traditions in their community to bring together groups in the community to encourage interfaith harmony and mutual respect. Religious leaders should seek to create anti-racist communities through interfaith activities that bring together majority/minority communities, group prayers and reflection on racism and injustices and interfaith efforts to work together on ending discrimination.

3. Talk about privilege and oppression

Religious and traditional leaders can help lead discussions in their congregations and communities about the concept of privilege. Systems of privilege and oppression create structural and institutional racism and accounting for our own access to privilege helps us to better understand how others experience oppression. In creating an anti-racist community, privilege is understood as “unearned access to resources (social power) that are only readily available to some people because of their social group membership; an advantage, or immunity granted to or enjoyed by one societal group above and beyond the common advantage of all other groups. Privilege is often invisible to those who have it.”² For people who have privilege (having white skin, being able-bodied, having inherited wealth, etc.), this means helping them to understand that having privilege doesn’t mean their life wasn’t hard. Having white skin, for example, doesn’t mean one’s life was easy but instead that their skin color wasn’t one of the factors making their life harder. Sometimes simple stories about different access to resources can lead to deeper discussions of privilege. One good example is a story of two people with two different bicycles:

² National Conference for Christians and Jews, “What is Privilege?” <https://www.nccj.org/what-privilege>

Jane and John are friends who both like to bike alone on the weekends. They decide one weekend to meet in a park in the middle of their town. They both live the same distance from the park and decide to meet there at 3PM. John has a new, expensive bike with 10 gears, a helmet, and a special aerodynamic outfit made especially for biking. On his way to the park, he goes up several difficult hills, passes through a rainstorm and a taxi almost hits him by accident. He arrives right at 3PM, waiting for Jane. He feels he got an excellent workout. Jane doesn't arrive until nearly 3:45PM. When she arrives, John sees that she has a very old bike with tires that have lost most of their tread. She doesn't have a helmet and she appears to be cut up and bruised. Because of her old tires, her bike slipped during the rainstorm and she fell onto the cement where she was side swiped by a car. Just like John, she also went up several hills, but because her bike doesn't have any gears, she was slow and had to walk her bike some of the way. Both John and Jane worked hard to get to the park but one had different resources on the way.



Stories like this one can be modified, tailored to your community and even made more complex over time to discuss questions of privilege and oppression. The bike story has its limits in that a bike analogy can never be the same as skin color or other privileges, oppressions and harmful policies and structures that follow people throughout life even after they “arrive”, but it can be used as an entry point to more serious discussions.

4. **Focus on educating children and youth and letting them lead the way forward**

Children are not inherently biased. Structural and institutional racism starts to take hold when we are very young through both [conscious and unconscious biases](#) taught to children via the media, family and other social messaging. If your religious community has youth groups or a children's congregation, be sure to start discussions about racism and human dignity from early on. There are many online resources, activities for children and children's books that can help start conversations (see resources below). Because youth is often leading the way through protest, it is important that youth learn about nonviolent resistance movements so that they become a resource and actors in their own right toward creating peaceful responses to injustice.

5. **Encourage your community to speak out against racism**

All religions and faiths embrace the importance of caring for others. All positive change starts at the grassroots level, which is why places of worship have been so central to many social justice movements around the world. Lead your community in becoming anti-racist and to end racism and all forms of discrimination. Make sure that your community is welcoming to all. Religious and traditional leaders can become allies. One great way to help your community become an anti-racist ally is through talking to your community about [bystander intervention](#). Bystander intervention is a strategy that allies use to recognize a potentially harmful situation or interaction and respond in a way that could positively influence the outcome.³ It is an effective way to deescalate many types of potentially incendiary situations and a first step to work toward positive change.

6. Collaborate with government officials for institutional change

Religious leaders are generally the most trusted authorities in local communities and have historically worked to bridge the gap in mutual understanding between their communities and government authorities. These leaders have a strong understanding of how racial disparities have a deep impact on local communities including, but not limited to: poverty, lack of access to quality education and health care, unemployment rates and the disproportionate impact of crises on communities, such as COVID-19. Religious leaders and government officials must work together through advising on policy and public messaging in a way that will positively impact communities and address the systemic causes of disparities at a community level. They can also work with local government authorities, including the police when possible, to start dialogues that increase mutual understanding and trust.

Resources:

Bounceback Parenting: 60+ Resources for Talking to Kids About Racism

<https://bouncebackparenting.com/resources-for-talking-to-kids-about-race-and-racism/>

Project Implicit, <https://www.projectimplicit.net/index.html>

Racial Equity Tools, <https://www.racialequitytools.org/curricula>

Training for Change

<https://www.trainingforchange.org/tools/?topic%5B19%5D=19&searchbox=>

Muslim Anti-Racism Collective

<http://www.muslimarc.org/about>

National Council of Churches Anti-Racism Resources

<https://nationalcouncilofchurches.us/resources/>

Religious Institute: Preaching and Congregational Resources for Responding to Racism, White Supremacy, and Police Violence

³ LeHigh University, "What is Bystander Intervention?" <https://studentaffairs.lehigh.edu/content/what-bystander-intervention>

<http://religiousinstitute.org/resources/anti-racism-resources/>

Buddhist Peace Fellowship: Buddha + Black Lives Matter: Racial Justice Toolkit
<http://www.buddhistpeacefellowship.org/buddha-black-lives-matter-racial-justice-toolkit/>

Antiracist Research and Policy Center
<https://antiracismcenter.com/>

American Friends Service Committee, Bystander Intervention
<https://www.afsc.org/bystanderintervention>

White Awake, <https://whiteawake.org/about/>

About the Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers:

The Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers was founded in 2013 as a concrete response to the increased awareness to include grassroots leaders and authorities to build sustainable peace. Since its inception, the Network has grown into a community of peacemakers ranging from grassroots religious and traditional actors to international NGOs, think tanks, and academic institutes, building bridges between grassroots peacemakers and global players in order to strengthen the work done for sustainable peace. The Network strengthens peacemaking through collaboratively supporting the positive role of religious and traditional actors in peace and peacebuilding processes.

<https://www.peacemakersnetwork.org/>

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